ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 27

NEWSWEEK
3 JANUARY 1983

Ben Sargent—© Austin American Statesman

A little knock on the door: Had 'wet affairs' turned into murder by proxy?

Bulgaria's Spy Masters

The headquarters of the Durzhavna Sigurnost, the Bulgarian state-security police, is a modern yellow structure that occupies half a block at 30 General Gurko Street in downtown Sofia. No identifying signs hang outside, and the first-floor windows are barred. Only an occasional dark car passes through the locked gates, where a lone Bulgarian militiaman stands guard. The building looks innocent enough, but it is one of the world's clearinghouses for espionage and dirty tricks.

Officially, the DS lies buried deep in the Bulgarian bureaucracy. Since 1971 it has been part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which also oversees the militia and border police. The man in charge is Internal Affairs Minister Dimitur Stoyanov, a former Army officer who worked for the KGB in several foreign posts and studied at the KGB Higher Intelligence School in Moscow. During that time, Stoyanov became a protégé of Soviet leader Yuri Andropov, then head of the KGB.

The DS has seven divisions, including intelligence, counterintelligence and military counterintelligence, which keeps tabs on top party leaders and military officers. Armed units of one division are charged with guarding President Todor Zhivkov and thwarting any coup attempts. DS agents deliberately keep their distance from the Bulgarian elites. "They have a large degree of autonomy," says one Western source in Sofia. "It is not unlikely that many people in very high circles might not know what they are up to."

Only the KGB knows what Bulgaria's spies are doing all the time. Like other East European intelligence agencies, the DS must submit a yearly account of its activities to Moscow. It is also crawling with KGB-appointed advisers, known as "uncles," who oversee operations, recruit local agents—and are not above spying on each other. Most DS men are graduates of Moscow's Institute for International Relations. "They spend six or seven years in the Soviet Union," says Vladimir Sakharov, a former KGB agent. "They have a lot of friends among the KGB. They feel obliged."

Trust: In other Eastern-bloc agencies, the degree of Soviet control varies. But in the DS, Soviet influence remains powerful and constant, reinforced by the Kremlin's close relationship with the Bulgarian government. It may be one measure of Soviet trust that the DS does have a small margin of independence, particularly in the Balkans. But the KGB retains a clear, final say on all DS operations with international repercussions.

A hit on the pope would surely have fit that particular category. The Soviets themselves have a history of "wet affairs"—their term for clandestine killings. But the KGB is believed to have renounced direct involvement in murder in the early 1960s, after a KGB agent named Bogdan Stashinsky defected to the West and began telling the world how the Soviets carried out assassinations. At that point, the Soviets may have chosen to give hit lists to subcontractors. One KGB defector, Yuri Nosenko, told the CIA that the Soviets did not decide to give up wet affairs—only to begin using foreigners as proxies.

If the Soviets did want front men for an attempt on the pope, they would have had strong reasons for choosing the Bulgarians. The DS has had recent experience in wet affairs—including the 1978 murder of Bulgarian defector Georgi Markov, who was killed in London by a poison pellet fired from an umbrella. Of all the satellite agencies the DS is the most loyal to Moscow, has had the fewest defections and would offer the lowest risk of leaks. Even so, many Western intelligence experts consider the DS inept and think that if the Soviets had wanted to order such a delicate mission they would have called on more sophisticated East German or Czech agents. At this point, the DS would probably like to encourage such skepticism. But if Bulgaria's spies have suddenly become the object of worldwide suspicion, they clearly have only their past record—and themselves—to blame.

MARK WHITAKER with ZOFIA SMARDZ in Sofia and DAVID C. MARTIN in Washington